

WOMEN CHARACTERS IN VĀLMĪKI RĀMĀYAṆA:  
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SOCIAL VALUES,  
CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES AND MODERN THOUGHT

The source of the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* lies in human susceptibility. Vālmīki had faith in man and his godly power. At the instance of Nārada, he wrote epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, the life story of Rāma and Sītā, the ideal man and woman on this world. The word *Rāmāyaṇa* means the “departing” (*ayana*) of Rāma and Sītā. In other words, it turned out to be the joint “departure” of Rāma and Sītā. It became their life story. It is the *ayana* of Rāma on the basis of the “glorious character” of Sītā. This story of Rāma and Sītā is the story of universal dimension, story of conflicts of different cultures.

The world of *Ādikavi* Vālmīki’s characters reveals the poet’s world of ideas. The process of creating these characters embodies the contemporary conditions, engrained beliefs and attitudes, *saṃskāras*, traditions, confirmed beliefs resulting from the action and reaction of prevalent moral and social values along with the basic instincts representing three aspects of human nature, i.e. virtuous (*sattvika*), given to worldly pleasures (*rājasī*) and base (*tāmasī*) that govern human behaviour.

The governing factors in the behaviour of these characters are man’s sense of justice, his sense of discretion and regulation. A perfect balance of the basic human instincts, habits and desires which are the real attributes of these characters, reconciling the contradictory tendencies among the characters. The psychological moulding of the characters was determined by the contribution of the racial culture

and the values of life accepted by society. These cultural values were based on the emotions, thoughts and behaviour of the people. It was through the interrelation of these factors that the values of life developed. Love, truth, compassion, pity, benevolence, faith, forgiveness, generosity, brotherliness, friendship, tolerance, virtuous conduct, renunciation, self-control and abandonment, the values that were universal and everlasting, and were based on the concept of public weal. Vālmīki gave a human basis to these values through the characters like Rāma and Sītā.

Woman is the main basis on which the concepts of society and culture rest. Vālmīki's *Rāmāyaṇa* is the epic in which the Indian culture is enshrined. It depicts the difficult arduous path of bringing about public weal as the path of subordination of human instincts. The characters are drawn from all sections of society. There is, on the one hand, the wifehood and generous motherhood of Kausalyā and, on the other hand, the dominating wifehood of Kaikeyī who is proud of her beauty and her motherhood. There is the tender feeling of dedication of Sītā and the Kṣatriya's quality of Sumitrā who is like a lioness. There is Mantharā motivated by selfish considerations and Śabarī engaged in the process of self-upliftment. This diversity of life situations gives varied dimensions to the different women characters of this epic. Rāma is the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, but it is the women who guide the course of the story and determine the events. Rāma's exile to the forest is the central event for which Kaikeyī and Mantharā are responsible. At the root of Sītā's abduction lies the incident of Śūrpaṇakhā's insult, whereas Sītā's abduction finally leads to the slaying of Rāvaṇa. *Uttara Rāmāyaṇa* is the story of Sītā exiled in the forest. Thus, women play an important role in the entire course of events. The social and racial life depicted in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is in accordance with the position of women in those days. The conflict of values and cultures is also reflected in the depiction of various women characters.

Sītā, Kausalyā, Sumitrā, Śabarī, Mandodarī etc. are the women characters in whom universal and perennial ideal values are embodied. They remain unmoved in their faith in order to uphold the ideals of life despite all the sufferings and hardships they have to undergo.

They stand for righteousness. Their competence, firmness and

faith in righteousness stand out more prominently in adverse conditions. The basis of their character rests on the firm basis of ideals and discretion acquired through *saṃskāras*. In the realistic characters, there is predominance of weakness and incompetence and comforts and conveniences of the physical world and individual selfishness and love and hate. Important among such characters are Kaikeyī, Mantharā and Śūrpaṇakhā. Their course of life runs through the physical world, it is natural and has a certain mobility. In their attempt to attain their personal targets and fulfilling their selfish motives, present the limitations of the life and world of ordinary human beings. The usefulness of their meaning and their eagerness to secure their rights become more intense. Because of extreme individualism they stand in contrast to social and cultural values.

The depiction of the women characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* by Vālmiki is on extremely broadbased. He has depicted every stage of life. Sītā, Kaikeyī, Kausalyā, Śūrpaṇakhā are the main women characters. Among the minor women characters are Sumitrā, Śantā, Sunayanā, Urmilā, Māṇḍavī, Śrutakīrtī, Mandodarī, Sulocanā, Tārā etc.; Arundhatī, Anasūyā and Ahalyā are the wives of the sages. Śabarī is a devotee. Among the other women characters are Surasā, Chāyāgrāhīnī and Trijaṭā, Dhanyamālīnī, Jhañjhaṭā etc.

Sītā, the daughter of Janaka, the king of Mithilā, is the central character in *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*. The beautiful Sītā "*Devamāyā*" is regarded as the daughter of the Earth (VRā., 1-1-28.30). Sītā's firmness, and her irrefutable faith and unflinching forebearance become evident right on the occasion of the exile to the forest. All arguments by Rāma served no purpose. At the same time, Sītā boldly said: «Had my father known that you (Rāma) are so faint-hearted, he would never have married me to you».

Sītā moved around with Rāma from forest to forest. Giving up all worldly comforts, she follows the path of her husband. Just as without a musical instrument the strings cannot sound a musical note, without the wheels a chariot cannot move, without Rāma she can find no happiness.

Despite her total dedication to Rāma and her devotion to him, she does not blindly follow him, like Tulsīdās's Sītā. She has her own identity. Whenever in doubt about Rāma's actions, she does not hesitate to express her opinion. When Rāma vows to destroy all demons

in the Daṇḍakāraṇya, she very humbly asks him whether it is fair to destroy innocent creatures who have done him no harm. Rāma satisfies her by explaining to her why he has taken that decision. Sītā is fearless by nature. Even after witnessing the original form of Rāvaṇa who has come to abduct her, she urges him to behave like a mendicant and not to place his life in the danger of being destroyed at the hands of Rāma. While at Daṇḍakāraṇya, Lakṣmaṇa disfigured Śūrpaṇakhā and as a result, Rāvaṇa abducted Sītā. But even when she was captive at Aśokavāṭikā in Laṅkā, Sītā remained unmoved by Rāvaṇa's alluring offers as well as threats. Since she is not a sentimental woman, she does not easily trust even Hanumān. Even at the sight of Rāma's head which Rāvaṇa produced before her by his phantasmal power, she does not lose her will power. Ultimately, Rāma becomes victorious in his war against Rāvaṇa. But Rāma, suspecting her fidelity, asks her to go somewhere else instead of taking her back. But Sītā is not non-lussed by Rāma's words.

Sītā replied with the anguish of a vanquished ascetic. Rather, she makes bold to say: «If you were suspicious about my character, why did you not convey it to me through Hanumān? It would have spared you and all those who fought for my sake from physical and mental suffering». It surprises her that Rāma was not appreciating her virtues. She does not even plead for mercy. She only seeks protection of fire. But even fire get quenched at the touch of Sītā.

Sītā returned to Ayodhyā and was restored to her glorious status of a queen. But she was not really so fortunate as all that. Because of rumours about her character among the subjects, Rāma, again expelled her and she lived in Vālmiki's hermitage. It was there that she gave birth to Lava and Kuśa. It was there that they were brought up and trained. Vālmiki re-established Sītā's purity and her great significance. But once again, Rāma sided with the public opinion. Sītā's self-respect was wounded once again and she chose to sink into Mother Earth.

Thus through Sītā's character, the ideal of woman is established. She is as tolerant and forgiving as the Earth. At the same time, she does not compromise in the matter of her self-respect. In Sītā, there is a harmonious blending of human emotions, intelligence and piety.

Kaikeyī, Aśvapati's daughter, is King Daśaratha's third and most

favourite queen. She exercises the greatest power in the palace. If Vālmiki has depicted Sītā as the “mystery of Divine Creation,” he has pictured Kaikeyī as an embodiment of the mystery of human creation. She is an extremely beautiful, astonishingly adventurous and highly ambitious woman. She is capable of doing just anything out of impulse for the sake of fulfilling her ambitions without giving any thought to the possible consequences. At the same time, she is natural in her behaviour and cheerful by temperament. She loves all the sons of Daśaratha. She welcomes all the daughters-in-law like Kausalyā. She has no feeling of jealousy or revenge as a co-wife. She greets with happy excitement and generosity the news about Rāma’s coronation. This indeed, is the proof of her simple and generous heart. She is in no doubt about Rāma’s candid intelligence, loving temperament, sense of gratitude, restraint and truthfulness. She says: «For me, Rāma and Bharata are the same, because Rāma gives me more respect than he gives even to Kausalyā».

But it is because of Mantharā’s instigating remarks that there is a change in her attitude. She is not able to hold herself in the face of Mantharā’s keen-sightedness, her proclivity to underhand manoeuvring and her capacity to influence others. Some scholars have interpreted this in the anxiety of the gods that Rāma was born only for the annihilation of the demons and the survival of the sages.

Kaikeyī became an instrument for that very great destiny of Rāma. She fulfilled her cherished desire of Rāma’s exile to the forest and Bharata’s coronation to the throne of Ayodhyā. That kind of behaviour on the part of Kaikeyī and her cruelty are accidental. Rāma takes it as God’s will.

Some scholars have tried to establish congruency between Kaikeyī’s highly commendable qualities and her subsequent behaviour and her harsh stubbornness. As such, Bharata’s coronation was the necessary condition of the Daśaratha’s marriage with Kaikeyī. Her strong reaction to Daśaratha’s strange behaviour, Rāma’s coronation in the absence of Bharata and her suspicion about Bharata’s reaction – these were the causes that lent significance to Kaikeyī’s character. Rāma also sends a message to Kauśalyā through Sumantā that forgetting her pride and status, she should show respect and goodwill towards all his mothers, especially Kaikeyī. But Kaikeyī has to bear

the brunt of the blame. Not only the people of Ayodhyā but all people in India till today consider Kaikeyī the cause of Daśaratha's death, of the exile to forest of Rāma-Lakṣmaṇa-Sītā and denounce her. Bharata too is enraged with his mother. Along with other inhabitants of Ayodhyā, Kaikeyī also goes to meet Rāma at Citrakūṭa. It is only Rāma who stops Bharata from denouncing Kaikeyī.

Kaikeyī is the moving force behind the most vital even in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. She is the most important character as the prime force behind the fundamental conflict in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It is in this context that Vālmīki has described Kaikeyī as an ambitious woman. From the point of view of social responsibility, familial loyalties and human behaviour, an imbalance in the life of any individual can result in something that is undesirable for human race as a whole. It is from this point of view that the study of Vālmīki's depiction of Kaikeyī is important.

Kausalyā. While Vālmīki has depicted Kaikeyī as a character who does not flinch in the matter of her rights as against social justice and royal dignity, he has described Kausalyā in contrast to her as the one who submits herself calmly to God's justice and who quietly suffers all hardships. Kausalyā, the embodiment of decorum even though the mother of Rāma and Daśaratha's eldest queen, does not expect to have any special privileges. On the contrary, because of Kaikeyī, Kausalyā was always neglected. With all her worldliness, Kausalyā is unearthly. She treats her moments of happiness and misery with a sense of equanimity and is never overcome by any frenzy of emotion. She is the very embodiment of simplicity and sanity.

On hearing the news about Rāma's exile to the forest, she is initially overcome by her anxiety about the future. She urges Rāma not to go to the forest. But then, she immediately decides not to obstruct her virtuous son in the performance of his duty. However, she still wavers, moved as she is by her motherly feelings. All her hopes and desires and feelings are centred round Rāma. She feels that all her worship and penance have been in vain. How will she bear her separation from Rāma? But in the end, she commands Rāma to follow the path of duty and justice. She says: «Oh my son, you know your duty. I am aware that you want to do your duty by following the path of religion. When you are faced with innumerable important tasks and when

it is essential to choose the most appropriate task, you must select only what is the best of them all. That is why I wish that you should do what is the best for you».

Kausalyā's sorrow at being separated from her son is beyond words. But she also feels immense pride for being mother of such a son. She expresses her desire to accompany her son to the forest. But Rāma urges her to get over her motherly attachment and let him do his duty. Then, out of helplessness, she accepts it as a play of Time. It is the most powerful factor and will give the strength to bear even this unbearable pain. She regains her composure and calmly tells him: «May your generous acts and pursuits protect you in your journey. May the powers you have acquired from the sage Viśvāmitra be your armour to protect you. Let day and night, months and seasons, rivers, mountains, Earth and Heaven, all Times and all directions take you along the path of Truth». With these words Kausalyā bids farewell to Rāma. These words of Kausalyā are meant to guide not only Rāma but all those who are eager, anywhere and at any time, to follow the path of Truth.

Even while describing that incident at Citrakūṭa, Vālmīki has shown Kausalyā as a calm person. She is not suffering from any kind of emotional disturbance. At first with mental and spiritual calm, she greets Bharata with the same affection as Rāma. Even when Rāma returns to Ayodhyā, she is overwhelmed by her fortune and remains silent. Kausalyā has been depicted essentially as a neglected wife and a tortured mother. Love, compassion, mercy, generosity, equanimity, tolerance are her qualities. But occasionally, she is also shown as possessed by suspicion, fear and even wrath.

Apart from these main women characters, other women characters in the *Rāmāyaṇa* also play their supportive roles. At the same time, they present India's cultural background.

Mantharā is Kaikeyī's personal maid who has come with her from her father's house from the time of her marriage. Naturally, rather than being faithful to the entire royal family, she is devoted only to Kaikeyī and Bharata. Devotion to the mistress is a quality with her, but because of her narrow-mindedness, she completely disturbs the situations. With her dubious thinking, she describes Rāma's coronation as an act of favouritism on the part of Daśaratha

and thereby succeeds in changing Kaikeyī's enthusiasm into gloom. The central event for which Kaikeyī is responsible has been, in fact, manipulated by Mantharā. It is only because of her narrow-minded selfishness and eagerness for material security that she is keen about Bharata's coronation. In subsequent poetic compositions, attempts have been made to depict Mantharā as a pardonable character, but till today, she is a discredited and denounced person by the Indians in general.

Śurpaṇakhā, Rāvaṇa's sister too, is an important character like Mantharā. Because of these characters, the story of Rāma takes unexpected turns. Mantharā by provoking greed in Kaikeyī and Śurpaṇakhā by arousing the desire for Sītā in Rāvaṇa, takes the story of Rāma into an unexpected but desired direction. She is attracted by Rāma and unhesitatingly indulges in denunciation of Sītā in her attempt to establish influence, superiority and suitability. Not realizing that Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa are ridiculing her, makes gestures of love before both of them and considering Sītā an obstacle, starts attacking her. As a result, following Rāma's instruction, Lakṣmaṇa disfigures her. Driven by her feeling of revenge, she instigates Rāvaṇa to make Sītā his wife. Śurpaṇakhā represents the unruly demon culture. There is pretence of power in it which makes the individual unrestrained in his behaviour. Discretion and moral conduct are not important. It is the manifest expression of hope, anger and revenge. Basically, it represents euphoric values which give no importance to feelings and immediate experience of pleasure is all that matters. The disfigurement of Śurpaṇakhā is the result of these values on the basis of which the conflict in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is depicted. It was essential to prudently curb this culture which sustained itself through the pursuits at the base level of animal instincts.

Urmilā has been mentioned in the *Rāmāyaṇa* as the second daughter of king Janaka. She has been married to Lakṣmaṇa. She has been mentioned along with Sītā, Māṇḍavī and Śrutakīrti. Her importance lies in being Lakṣmaṇa's wife.

Sumitrā is one of the three queens of Daśaratha. She is more important as the mother of Lakṣmaṇa and Śatrughna than as Daśaratha's wife. She cherishes no selfish thoughts because of her sons. She is a contented woman and remains equanimous in happiness



or misery, gain or loss, union or separation, joy or sorrow. Because of her sense of equanimity, she is not guided by any selfish motive and does not nurture any ambition. When Lakṣmaṇa prepares himself to go to the forest with Rāma, she calmly blesses him and feels proud that her son, keeping up a great tradition, is following the path of restraint and sacrifice. Her silence symbolizes her quiescence and natural goodness. She gives farewell to Lakṣmaṇa like a staunch devotee abiding by the will of the Divine.

«My son, you are born to make your abode in the forest. You have a healthy attachment towards your kith and kin. Rāma is your elder brother and you are accompanying him to the forest. Go, do your duty. See that Rāma does not have to face any trouble. Be on the alert».

Thus Sumitrā is a mother who encourages her son to follow the path of sacrifice and penance by keeping her sorrow to herself and raising herself above attachment and malevolence, greedy, and considerations of gain. Sumitrā is the embodiment of friendship as her name indicates and she is a friend to everybody. She consoles Kausalyā who is overwhelmed by her sorrow. Sumitrā occupies a commanding position in everyone's heart like Śrīdevī. Sumitrā who establishes harmony between the essential purity of Kausalyā and the greed for fame and renown of Kaikeyī is a superlunary creation of Vālmiki.

Ahalyā is the wife of the sage Gautama. She is a woman of exquisite charm whom God had created with the overpowering beauty. A mere glance at the heavenly god Indra weakens her and she expresses her passionate desire and agrees to satisfy the curiosity of Indra who has come before her with a desire to indulge in amorous sport. But with the arrival of the sage Gautama, she becomes a victim to his curse. She is not only turned into a stone, her personality is made invisible. She remains in the same hermitage, and dejected and uncared. Ahalyā has been portrayed at the human level. She is not a stone, she is an ascetic who is engaged in acts of self-mortification. Essentially, the episode of Ahalyā depicts the blind male passion for woman in a male-dominated society. Ahalyā cursed because of her physical weakness. But through her penance, she frees herself from the curse and regains her dignity. Dr. Pandurang Rao, an eminent Sanskrit scholar, has interpreted the character of both at earthly and

spiritual levels. He says: «...Ahalyā represents various aspects of worldly treasure. All letters of the alphabet are embodied in her name. Ahalyā's beauty is the undying beauty of the letters of Indian alphabet. Ahalyā is the empress of the living creatures and even a god like Indra regards her with lustful eyes and the sage Gautama with his intellectual brilliance regards her from the intellectual point of view. But the real importance of this beautiful woman representing the entire alphabet is neither physical nor psychological. Only the spiritual view which is above both these can see Ahalyā in her true form»<sup>1</sup>.

Śabarī too, like Ahalyā, enshrines the divinity of Rāma. She is also important on account of her penance and devotional sentiment. The incident showing Śabarī's self-control, faith and detachment becomes an important step in the development of the story-content of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. It is a triumphal cry of an individual's *sādhana*. Even though belonging to a lower caste, she could become an accomplished *tapasvinī* (ascetic) due to her penance and could attain the sacred place which only a sage like Maṭaṅga could attain. The caste-system was not very rigid and individual effort could earn respect and appreciation. The incident of Śabarī giving to Rāma the berries after tasting them herself is not included in Vālmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*. But she is highly praised for her good qualities, her identification with Rāma and her reception of him. In the subsequent compositions dealing with the story of Rāma, Śabarī is depicted as an ideal of devotedness.

Naresh Mehta, modern poet, has showed her, in his *Shabari*, as a symbol of "class conflict".

Anasūyā is the wife of sage Atri and a great *tapasvinī*. She is without any pride and has conquered her anger. She is very affectionate and possesses divine powers. Arundhatī, wife of sage Vasiṣṭha, is also inspired by the same values.

Mandodarī is Rāvaṇa's chief queen, possessing extraordinary beauty, the daughter of the nymph Hemāni. She does not support many actions of Rāvaṇa. She considers Sītā's abduction inappropriate. To her mind, Rāvaṇa's defeat and his death are only the reward of his sinful acts. Though belonging to a demon family, Mandodarī is not demonic because she cherishes idealistic values.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ramayan ka Mahilā Patra*, Dr. Pandurang Rao, pp. 55-57.

Tāra is the wife of the monkey-leader Bālī. She is motivated more by the realities of life than by idealism. She has her own particular qualities as Bālī's wife. She is an apt conversationalist who can adjust her talk according to the occasions, and can easily grasp the situation before her. Realizing the valour and other qualities of Rāma, she urges Bālī to give up his idea of revenge. She has foresight and ability to make logical arguments and taking appropriate decisions and is quick-witted.

Trijaṭā though a demoness in Rāvaṇa's family like Vibhīṣaṇa does not support Rāvāna. She possesses the qualities of compassion, sympathy and goodwill. She keeps Sītā company in Aśokavāṭikā and consoles her.

Among other women characters, there is Meghanāda's wife Sulocanā who is known for her total devotion to her husband. Saramā is Vibhīṣaṇa's wife. Surasā and Siṃhikā are the characters through whom Hanumān's gallantry and brave deeds have been conveyed. There is only a brief mention of Śāntā as the daughter of King Daśaratha's friend Ramapāda. She has no importance from the point of view of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story. Nor have these characters been depicted in detail.

Sunayanā is the wife of king Janaka of Mithilā. Abiding by Janaka's wish she is truly his life companion. She does not feel unhappy when she sees Sītā following the ideal of devotion to her husband and living the forest facing all kinds of hardships. Instead, she feels proud.

Thus, the women characters in the *Rāmāyaṇa* are fantastic, with all their good qualities, idealism, strong personalities, their staunch faith in following the path of duty and truth. It is through their great qualities of character that Vālmiki has enshrined the cultural values of India. These characters possess godly qualities and abilities.

At the same time, social and cultural values have also been formulated through these women characters for the whole mankind, who are the founders and protectors of the abiding values underlying the culture of India. They are model characters. They are like the beacon lights to inspire mankind for all times.

In the context of the present day conditions, the value system of the *Rāmāyaṇa* raises certain questions. My study of women characters

in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the value system guiding them revealed to me the absence of a real picture of the woman and the importance given to her in the Indian mythology. There is no doubt a concept of ideal man-woman relationship of *Ardhanarīśvara*, that is, of Lord Śiva as infused with his consort Pārvatī. But in reality, woman was regarded as her husband's possession, and as such, her body was given the highest importance and her soul and mind came to be regarded as of no consequence. Sītā gave up all royal comforts and shared with Rāma hardships of exile for 14 years. After rescuing her from captivity in which Rāvaṇa had kept her, Rāma asked her to go through a fire ordeal (*agniparikṣā*). Even after that, Rāma discarded her. At a later stage also, Sītā was humiliated. Sītā, in distress, urged the Mother Earth, to give way and Sītā sank into it. This is an evidence of an unbalanced and unequal relationship between man and woman. The value system which was exemplary for the whole mankind, for man and woman – it was restricted to women only.

Today men expect women to follow the ideal of Sītā without bothering to shape themselves after the image of Rāma.

Kaikeyī is the most realistic character who aspires to be the Queen Mother (*Rājāmātā*). The word was given to her father by Daśaratha at the time of marriage that her son would be the King. She insisted her right, but she was discredited and denounced.

Śurpaṇakhā was fascinated by the beauty of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa but she was ridiculed and her nose was chopped off. In a society where polygamy was prevalent, Ahalyā was cursed to become a stone. Because the women in flesh and blood were condemned. The docile, obedient and suppressed women were rated high. I feel in a system and society governed by male chauvinism, these facts have been interpreted in their own favour and women are left to suffer. Their sufferings are being glorified through ages to fulfill their own selfish motives. Showing an ideal good woman and bad woman in sharp contrast of black and white has done the utmost harm. Society refuses to accept her as a human being. That is why later, the great devotee of Rāma, Tulsīdāsa, who wrote the *Rāmacarita Mānasa*, had put women in the category of the cattle thereby giving man the right to dominate and even condemn her. The story of Rāma was rewritten by a Bengālī woman scholar in 19th century in which she has not

depicted Sītā as a docile and submissive woman resigning herself to the wishes of her husband, but as an independent, strong character and a source of inspiration for him. So, I feel the interpretation of the value system of *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* should be interpreted and understood in the right spirit.